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ACCOUNTING FOR THE WHOLE: WHY PANTHEISM IS ON A METAPHYSICAL PAR WITH COMPLEX THEISM

Caleb Cohoe

Pantheists are often accused of lacking a sufficient account of the unity of the cosmos and its supposed priority over its many parts. I argue that complex theists, those who think that God has ontologically distinct parts or attributes, face the same problems. Current proposals for the metaphysics of complex theism do not offer any greater unity or ontological independence than pantheism, since they are modeled on priority monism. I then discuss whether the formal distinction of John Duns Scotus offers a way forward for complex theists. I show that only those classical theists who affirm divine simplicity are better off with respect to aseity and unity than pantheists. Only proponents of divine simplicity can fairly claim to have found a fully independent ultimate being.

1. Introduction: Aseity and Unity

What, if anything, does it take to account for what we see around us? Classical theists insist that only a transcendent entity can provide sufficient metaphysical grounding for reality. To explain why things exist, we need to find a ground of being that is more fundamental than familiar material objects, such as humans and horses, or their material parts, such as atoms and subatomic particles. We even need to go beyond the universe as a whole. Pantheists, by contrast, think that the cosmos itself could be the ultimate being or at least the entity that grounds and explains the manifold appearances around us.¹

¹Pantheists can be counted as theists insofar as they believe in God (while identifying God and cosmos). Classical theists, as I use that term, are those who hold that there is a cause or ultimate being (i.e. God) which is metaphysically ultimate and which transcends the cosmos and cannot be identified with it. This paper focuses on the question of metaphysical or ontological ultimacy. This sort of ultimacy is related to but distinct from axiological ultimacy (being the best or most valuable) and soteriological ultimacy (being the source of salvation, meaning, and fulfillment). Some such as J. L. Schellenberg insist that an ultimate being must fulfill all these roles (*The Will to Imagine*). While I am open to such a position, this paper does not assume anything about the axiological or soteriological status of the metaphysically ultimate being, since that lies outside its scope. It does not make claims about what sorts of axiological or soteriological ultimacy classical theism in particular requires.



Classical theists typically employ some version of a cosmological argument to argue for an ultimate transcendent being. They maintain that an independent, necessarily existing divine being grounds and explains the universe in a way that the cosmos itself cannot.² The universe and the things in it are too contingent to be the stopping points of metaphysical explanation. Only a transcendent God can meet the conditions of aseity and unity necessary to be ultimate. Of course, for this sort of argument to succeed, the transcendent being must not need metaphysical explanation in the way that ordinary concrete objects and the universe itself do. In this paper, I lay out the requirements that aseity and unity place on ultimacy. I then use these requirements to argue that only classical theists who affirm divine simplicity are better off with respect to aseity and unity than pantheists. If we endorse aseity and unity as constraints on ultimacy, we are pushed to acknowledge that the ultimate is entirely simple.³ Complex theists, those who think that God has ontologically distinct parts or attributes, are on a metaphysical par with pantheists when it comes to the explanatory and ontological priority of their supposed ultimate being.⁴ Current proposals for the metaphysics of complex theism do not offer any greater unity or ontological independence than pantheism, since they are modeled on a priority monism that is congenial to pantheists. Thus pantheists offer a strong challenge to classical theists: either embrace divine simplicity or

²Recent discussions of this sort of cosmological and foundational reasoning include Pruss, *The Principle of Sufficient Reason*; Pearce, "Foundational Grounding"; Almeida, *Cosmological Arguments*; Hamri, "On the Ultimate Ground of Being"; Bohn, "Divine Foundationalism."

³There is a further issue here: are we entitled to assume that the simple divine being must be transcendent (i.e., entirely distinct from us and entities in the world), or does this require argument? There are versions of monism, such as Advaita Vedanta Hinduism, that affirm a strong version of ontological simplicity but also hold an identity between the ultimate simple divine being and other entities that might seem to be distinct, such as the individual soul. We see this in Adi Shankara's insistence that the divine, simple, and immutable Ātman is one and the same within various seemingly distinct things (*Vedānta Explained*, I.1.11), without change or loss of unity (II.2.35) and while also being the same as the individual soul (II.3.17). Cf. the relationship between the individual soul, the world soul, and *Nous* for Plotinus or issues about the One in Parmenides (e.g. Palmer, "Parmenides"). This issue would require another paper, so I will not address it here, though for an argument that the ultimate principle cannot in any way enter into relations of composition with other things, see Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia Q. 3 A. 8.

⁴It is important to note that many Christian theologians affirm absolute divine simplicity while also affirming the doctrine of the Trinity. Theologians in the early Christian, medieval, and modern eras usually worked to show how this doctrine is compatible with simplicity, rather than opting for complex theism. For example, Augustine says (*de Trin.* VII 1.2) that God is "absolutely simple" (*summe simplex*), a view Thomas Aquinas strongly defends (e.g. *Summa Theologiae* Ia Q. 3 A. 2–8). The *Westminster Confession* holds that God is "without parts" and "immutable" (ch. 2.1). Things are somewhat more complex for the Eastern fathers, but they definitely take themselves to be affirming divine simplicity, albeit perhaps with more qualifications, e.g., Basil of Caesarea, *Against Eunomius*, II 29. For more on these complications, see Radde-Gallwitz, *Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Transformation of Divine Simplicity*, chapters 4, 6–7, and conclusion. Obviously, the doctrine that God is three persons raises issues for divine simplicity, but I will not be considering them in this paper.

accept that pantheism and theism are on a metaphysical par when it comes to explanatory and ontological priority. Only proponents of divine simplicity can properly claim to have found a fully independent ultimate being.

To evaluate whether the cosmos or some other non-transcendent entity can serve as an ultimate being instead of a transcendent divine being, we need to know more about the constraints on serving as a ground for being or being ultimate. Two constraints are central to this question: aseity and unity. Aseity (from the Latin *a se* "from itself") means that something has being or exists in virtue of itself and not in virtue of some other, further being. An ultimate being or a ground of being cannot, by definition, be dependent on some other entity for its being. If supposed ultimate being *A* were ontologically dependent on *B*, *A* would not, after all, be the ground of being, since *B* is grounding its existence. *B* would also be more ultimate than *A*, precisely insofar as it grounds *A*.

The ultimate being must also have a sufficient degree of unity. An unrelated collection of ontologically separate things, *C*, *D*, *E*, could not be the ultimate being. A bundle or heap of properties is not a suitable candidate for the ultimate being because a heap or bundle needs some further explanation for why its constituents are what they are.⁵ The bundle itself does not need to have the constituents or properties that it does. Instead there is an external explanation for what accounts for those constituents being present in that way. For example, one bundle of sticks is composed of a certain number of sticks and has a certain shape because of the way the sticks were collected by an agent (say, for kindling) while a bunch of sticks on the seashore have the number and arrangement that they do because of the interaction between the tide and the beach. In bundle cases, there is some further external thing beyond the bundle that accounts for the composition of the bundle, whether an agent or some sort of force. But any sort of ontological dependence or causal dependence on some further thing that united *C*, *D*, and *E* would mean that the supposed ultimate being was not ultimate. So the ultimate being can neither be a mere collection of things nor any sort of unified whole that depends on something external for its unity.

This means that on some metaphysical views there will be nothing that counts as an ultimate being. If the universe is a Humean collection of successive beings with correlations between them but no deeper or ultimate explanation for the whole, then there will be nothing that counts as an ultimate being. In a Humean universe, although there is nothing beyond the universe that causes or explains it, the universe itself does not count as an ultimate being because it lacks the sort of unity something needs to count as a substance or real being.⁶ The universe is just one thing after another;

⁵I am holding fixed that all three constituents are necessary for the ultimate being. If one of them, *C* say, were the ground of everything else, then *D* and *E* would be otiose.

⁶I am thus taking the conditions for ontological ultimacy to be stronger than those for being ontologically fundamental. At least on some views, fundamentality can be relative. Even in a Humean universe, some entities (e.g., the elements of physics) might be more fundamental than others and thus they would be candidates for what "the fundamental entities" refer to in such a universe. By contrast, in a Humean universe, there is nothing unified and ontologically independent enough to meet the conditions for ultimacy.

it is not some unified whole composed out of its parts. All the explanatory work is done by connections between individual things, not by the universe itself. Because of this, such a universe could not fulfill the role of an ultimate being. To be a candidate for an ultimate being, something must have sufficient unity as well as meet the aseity condition.

2. *Metaphysical Issues for Pantheism*

Can a pantheist cosmos satisfy aseity and unity? To answer this question, we need to say more about what pantheism is. This is a challenging task, given the great variety of views that go under this name. Andrei Buckareff and Yujin Nagasawa take a straightforward approach in their recent introduction to a collection of papers on pantheism and panentheism, defining pantheism as the view that "God is identical with the universe."⁷ This approach makes it clear that pantheists deny transcendence: God or any part of God is not outside or distinct from the universe. But it leaves unspecified what view of God, if any, is required to count as a pantheist. Is taking the universe to be the ultimate substance enough to be a pantheist or must the universe also be seen as having various traditional divine attributes, such as goodness, knowledge, causal power, etc.? For the purposes of this paper, I will take pantheists to be committed to denying divine transcendence.⁸ I will also take them to be committed to thinking that the universe forms an ordered whole which counts as an ultimate being and satisfies aseity and unity.

What is required in order for the universe to do this? Here pantheists differ. Some take a more minimal approach. On such views, the cosmos forms an ordered whole that has priority over its parts, but it is not itself an entity with knowledge or moral goodness. It may contain order and mind because its parts are panpsychic or proto-conscious, not because the cosmos itself is a mind.⁹ On other versions of pantheism, the cosmos itself has a mind or a world-soul.¹⁰ This divine force, which is itself good and rational, organizes and orders the whole universe. These two approaches have different strategies for establishing the unity and order of the cosmos. On the first type, order and mind arise from features present in the material parts themselves. On the second type, by contrast, there is a fundamentally intellectual or psychic principle involved in ordering the

⁷Buckareff and Nagasawa, "Guest Editorial Preface," 2.

⁸My article will leave aside panentheist views, according to which, as Buckareff and Nagasawa put it, "the universe is an aspect of God, where this may include taking the universe to constitute or bear some other relation besides identity to God" ("Guest Editorial Preface," 2). If complex theism turns out to be on a par with pantheism then a fortiori it will be on a metaphysical par with panentheism.

⁹Goff, "Did the Universe Design Itself?" offers one defense of such a view.

¹⁰Proponents of such views include the Stoics, and their divine embodied *Logos*, but also eclectic thinkers influenced by both Stoics and Platonists, such as Marcus Terrentio Varro, who, according to Augustine, identified God with the soul of the cosmos (*civ. Dei* VII.6; cf. VII. 9–10, 29–30). A contemporary example of this sort of position is found in Leslie, "What God Might Be."

matter of the universe. I will return below to the metaphysical advantages and disadvantages of these two types, but for now, we can start with the challenges common to both types.

The complexity of the universe may seem, on its own, to rule out aseity and unity. Indeed, pantheism has been attacked by theists for being unable to meet these conditions. How could a being with manifold parts be the ultimate being, the metaphysical first principle of reality? With respect to aseity, the cosmos seems ontologically dependent in several ways. To begin with, on some views, the identity of the universe depends on the identity of its parts. Without the particular features of the space-time continuum that obtain (e.g., without the particles or fields or whichever other entities constitute it), the cosmos would not be what it is. Even if, however, its identity is not contingent on having the particular parts it does, it is still the case that the universe would not be what it is without some parts. Even if the parts that constitute it are changing, it is still always true that without any of these parts the universe itself would not be. In this way, it seems to be ontologically dependent on something outside itself. The being of the universe seems to be contingent either on its parts or on some external cause that explains its existence.

Serious worries also arise with respect to unity. If the ultimate being has parts, then we need an explanation for why the cosmos has these parts and is one unified entity (as opposed to something like a heap). This explanation would seemingly have to come from something further, not from the cosmos or its parts. Many have doubted whether the cosmos is or could be an internally unified whole: it either lacks unity or is unified by something external to it. There are some metaphysical views, such as unrestricted composition, which would allow for all the things in the universe to compose another further thing.¹¹ However, many hold that stronger conditions are required for metaphysical composition. Why think that all the entities in the universe compose a unified whole? Further, even if there is a sort of unity to the cosmos, it might not be the strong sort of substantial and formal unity. To be ultimate, the universe needs to be the sort of whole that can serve as the fundamental ground for all other beings.

3. Pantheist Responses

There are various pantheist responses to these worries. Jonathan Schaffer insists that "according to common sense, the cosmos is prior to its many proper parts" since the various possible divisions of the whole cosmos into parts seem arbitrary and non-fundamental, whereas the whole is not arbitrary.¹² Schaffer offers additional metaphysical arguments in favor of

¹¹Proponents of unrestricted composition or universalism, the view that, for any objects, there is a single object that is composed of those objects, include Leśniewski, "Foundations of the General Theory of Sets"; Goodman and Quine, "Steps Towards a Constructive Nominalism"; Lewis, *Parts of Classes*; Rea, "In Defense of Mereological Universalism"; and Baker, *The Metaphysics of Everyday Life*, 191–193.

¹²Schaffer, "Monism," 49.

such a view. One of his key arguments is based on what he calls the asymmetry of supervenience:

The asymmetry is that the proper parts must supervene on their whole, but the whole need not supervene on its proper parts. In other words, though emergence is metaphysically possible, submergence—the converse of emergence—is metaphysically impossible.¹³

While facts about the parts sometimes fix facts about the whole (if the parts of the table are flammable, the whole table will be as well), strong emergence, where the whole has properties that do not supervene on its parts, is widely taken to be possible (even by those who do not think it actually obtains). By contrast, if you hold the whole fixed, everything about its parts will be fixed as well. There can be no “submergent” properties, as Schaffer puts it, that are underivable from truths about the whole. Any candidate for such a property (*F*ness say) would be a property of a certain part, *G*. But *G* is, by definition, part of the whole, so that *what the whole is* involves having *G* as a part. But to be such a part, to be *G*, is to have this property of *F*ness, which means that *F*ness is included in the whole. Given this asymmetry of supervenience, a priority monism grounded in the whole has an advantage over part-first ontologies.

There are also various responses pantheists can make to account for the unity and contingency of the universe. Some pantheist views appeal to panpsychism to explain the fine-tuning, unity, and order of the universe.¹⁴ Others suggest that the goodness of the cosmos might itself explain why the cosmos must be as it is.¹⁵ Some, such as Baruch Spinoza, claim that, in fact, everything that happens in the universe is necessary.¹⁶ Contingency is only apparent. These strategies have various advantages and disadvantages and not all are mutually compatible. This paper cannot definitively evaluate the prospects for all of them. Instead, its goal is to compare the general pantheist metaphysical strategy with the strategies used by theists. All these pantheist responses to worries about unity and aseity make use of the idea that a whole can be prior to its parts and ultimate even if it depends in some way on its parts. The cosmos may need its parts and their order to be what it is, but this does not undermine its status as the unified ultimate being.

How does this sort of response compare with the metaphysical strategies used by theists? If pantheists’ accounts are successfully developed, how will the pantheist cosmos fare on aseity and unity? Answering this depends on whether metaphysical alternatives fare better with respect to

¹³Schaffer, “Monism,” 56.

¹⁴E.g., Goff, “Did the Universe Design Itself?”

¹⁵E.g., Leslie, “What God Might Be.”

¹⁶“In nature there is nothing contingent, but all things have been determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and produce an effect in a certain way” (Spinoza, *Ethics* Ip29); “things could have been produced by God in no other way, and in no other order than they have been produced” (Spinoza, *Ethics*, Ip33).

aseity and unity. If alternative metaphysical views provide stronger candidates for a being with ultimate ontological and explanatory priority, then they possess an advantage over pantheism with respect to ultimacy. If, however, alternative metaphysical views on the ultimate face similar problems with aseity and unity, then pantheism is no worse off than its competitors in terms of these conditions.¹⁷

4. Simple Theism and Strong Aseity

Our goal is to examine how pantheism stands on these questions relative to theistic views. Here we need to bring in the distinction between simple theists, who hold that the ultimate principle is *entirely* simple, having no ontologically distinct parts or attributes, and complex theists, who deny this. While simple theists are better off with respect to aseity and unity than pantheists, complex theists face similar challenges.

Let us start with simple theism. This view endorses the following principle:

Absolute Ontological Independence: The ultimate being cannot, in any way, depend for its being on anything distinct from itself.

This principle is interpreted by the classical theist tradition as ruling out any internal parts or ontologically distinct properties in the ultimate being. Figures such as Plotinus, Augustine, Ibn-Sinā [Avicenna], Anselm of Canterbury, Moses Maimonides, and Thomas Aquinas use this idea of aseity to insist on absolute divine simplicity.¹⁸ Any distinct parts or properties would contribute to making the ultimate what it is, making the ultimate dependent in some way, and violating aseity.¹⁹ Further, since the ultimate being is entirely simple, no question of unity arises, since there are no distinct parts, properties, or attributes to unify. Simple theism entirely satisfies the conditions of aseity and unity.²⁰

¹⁷For the purposes of this article, I am setting aside epistemic issues about how probable it is that we live in a pantheist cosmos as opposed to a created universe (or various other options). While these questions are vital for an overall evaluation of pantheism, theism, and naturalism, evaluating them would require careful consideration of a number of complex issues, from the evidence for panpsychism to the status of natural laws and the nature of modality. Instead of examining all these details, this article will look at the structure of the resulting worldviews. If the pantheist model can be successfully worked out, what status will the pantheist cosmos have with respect to aseity and unity when compared to the simple theist and complex theist?

¹⁸Plotinus, *Enneads*, V.4.1.5–15, VI.8, 8.14–16, 14.35–42, VI.9, 6.13–30; Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 6.7.8; Ibn-Sinā [Avicenna] *Metaphysics*, book I, chapter 7; Anselm, *Proslogion*, 18; Maimonides, *Guide*, ch. 50; Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia 3.7. As noted above, for classical Christian thinkers there are complications here related to the Trinity. However, it is important to note thinkers such as Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas insist that the Trinity does not compromise absolute simplicity and endorse full-fledged divine simplicity. As my focus is comparing the respective metaphysics of pantheism and theism, this paper sets aside these Christian theological issues.

¹⁹See Cohoe, “Why the One Cannot Have Parts” for further elaboration and discussion of this claim.

²⁰For an overview of the traditional connection between simplicity and aseity see Brower, “Simplicity and Aseity.”

In pagan, Jewish, Islamic, and Christian contexts, simple theism was the dominant view during classical antiquity and throughout the medieval period. However, many contemporary theists reject simplicity due to concerns about its coherence²¹ and what they take to be its theological implications.²² For our purposes, we need only note that simple theism is in good shape with respect to the conditions of aseity and unity, as long as its coherence can be defended, something a number of recent thinkers have done ably.²³

5. Complex Theism and Weak Aseity

This leaves complex theists, those who deny absolute simplicity. Proponents of this sort of view endorse the claim that there is an ultimate transcendent being, but also hold that this being has multiple, ontologically distinct parts or properties.²⁴

As R. T. Mullins puts it, such theists

reject divine simplicity and opt for divine unity. God's attributes are not identical to each other. Instead, God's essential attributes are distinct and coextensive. God's wisdom is not identical to His power, but one will not find God's wisdom floating free from His power.²⁵

How does complex theism fare with respect to aseity and unity?

Complex theists by and large recognize aseity and unity as conditions that the ultimate being needs to meet and seek to show that a complex divine being would meet these conditions. However, since they think that the divine being has parts or properties that are distinct from God, even if necessarily co-existent, they cannot endorse *Absolute Ontological Independence*. Instead, they must endorse a weaker version of aseity framed in terms of external dependence. Mullins, for example, insists that "the doctrine of divine aseity says that God's existence and essential nature do not depend upon anything *outside of God*."²⁶ Things that are "completely distinct" from God must depend on God and God must not depend on anything that is "completely distinct" from God. We can formulate this weaker independence principle as follows:

Qualified Ontological Independence: The ultimate being cannot, in any way, depend for its being on anything *completely* distinct from itself.

²¹E.g., Plantinga, *Does God have a Nature?*; Gale, *On the Nature and Existence of God*.

²²E.g., Mullins, "Simply Impossible." For worries about coherence, see Plantinga, *Does God have a Nature?* and Gale, *On the Nature and Existence of God*; for worries about simplicity's theological implications see Mullins, "Simply Impossible."

²³Defenses include Bergman and Brower, "A Theistic Argument Against Platonism"; Brower, "Making Sense of Divine Simplicity"; Stump, "The Nature of a Simple God"; Jacobs, "The Ineffable, Inconceivable, and Incomprehensible God"; Cohoe, "Why the One Cannot Have Parts"; Schärfl, "Divine Simplicity."

²⁴The claim that the ultimate being is transcendent and thus not the same as the universe is, of course, the key feature that separates complex theists from pantheists.

²⁵Mullins, "The Difficulty with Demarcating Panentheism," 331.

²⁶Mullins, "Simply Impossible," 192, italics added.

This allows for God to have ontologically distinct parts while still preserving aseity. As long as everything outside of God depends on God and God depends on nothing outside God, aseity is satisfied, regardless of which ontological dependence relations obtain within the divine being.

We should be suspicious of this move. There are surely some internal ontological relations that would rule out aseity. If the divine being turned out to ontologically depend on the divine attributes while they did not depend on the divine being, this would certainly call the supposed aseity of the divine being into question.

Thomas Morris tries to motivate distinct conditions for ontological relations internal and external to God by suggesting that dependence relations involving God are different from those only involving creatures. He insists that the criteria for ontological dependence relations between created objects are fundamentally different from those that obtain between God and created objects:

on any ontology in which everything distinct from God depends on him for its existence, composition and complexity relations into which God enters will be importantly different from composition and complexity relations holding among created objects. Asymmetrical ontological dependence relations obtaining among the latter will not hold in the same way among the former.²⁷

So, everything distinct from God is asymmetrically ontologically dependent on God, since each thing outside God relies on God for its being, but things might be different within God. Morris claims that even if:

there is any substantive sense in which God depends on his properties, it will also be true that his properties depend, and depend in a deeper ontological sense, on him. Thus God will never be on the receiving end only, so to speak, of an ontological dependence relation.²⁸

Morris thinks (contra Anselm, as he notes) that as long as the divine properties also depend on God, aseity is preserved and God will still count as an independent being, even if God depends on the divine attributes in some sense. Morris holds that aseity is satisfied as long as, for any candidate independent being *I*, there is no distinct being on which it depends and there is no being, property, or attribute on which *I* asymmetrically depends. Humans, horses, and hadrons are not independent beings because they asymmetrically depend on the distinct divine being. A complex divine being, however, can be independent because such a being's dependence on its parts is symmetric: parts and whole both depend on each other.

6. Pantheism Satisfies Weak Aseity

Now Anselm himself raises a challenge for Morris: a supposedly ultimate being with parts "is not fully one but is in some way many and different

²⁷Morris, "Dependence and Divine Simplicity," 170.

²⁸Morris, "Dependence and Divine Simplicity," 171.

from itself.”²⁹ Such a being could not be ultimate because it “is able to be divided either actually or conceptually.”³⁰ Since its parts are different from the whole, we can evaluate them separately insofar as they are distinct from each other, at least conceptually, and then either the whole or the parts must be lesser than the other. But this would mean that the ultimate being either is or has parts than which something greater can be conceived, so it is not ultimate. We can conceive of a being that is entirely ultimate without any lesser parts and this being is greater than a being some of whose parts are not the greatest or best. Thus, even if this supposedly ultimate being were in fact unable to be divided from its properties, the fact that it is conceptually divisible would still make it lesser than a being that is entirely one and indivisible. This pressures the complex theists to either abandon perfect being theology or hold that simple theism turns out to be contradictory, too good to be true.

Even if, however, complex theists are successful in defending *Qualified Ontological Independence* as the appropriate standard, they will still be unable to claim an advantage over other metaphysical views. What Morris says about God could be said just as easily about the cosmos by a pantheist. If the ultimate being is the cosmos itself, of which everything else is a part, then the cosmos counts as an *a se* being, since there is nothing *completely* distinct from it on which it depends (since everything that exists is part of it). Moreover, everything outside of it can be said to depend on it: a condition trivially satisfied, since there is nothing outside of it.

We can see this clearly in the characterization of aseity provided by Yann Schmitt:

(1') Necessarily, for any *x*, if *x* is God, *x* creates and maintains in existence whatever is not identical with *x* or a part of *x*.³¹

Substituting in the Ultimate or the Cosmos for God illustrates how this condition is in danger of being trivially satisfied by pantheist views:

(1'') Necessarily, for any *x*, if *x* is the Ultimate/the Cosmos, *x* creates or maintains in existence whatever is not identical with *x* or a part of *x*.

If everything is either identical with or a part of the cosmos, then this condition seems to be met. There is nothing outside of the cosmos which the cosmos does not create or maintain, since on such metaphysical views there is nothing outside of it at all. The cosmos itself counts as *a se*.

7. Only Strong Aseity Can Distinguish Theism from Pantheism

This suggests there is a problem with only requiring an ultimate being to be independent from external entities: it allows for aseity to be trivially satisfied by claiming that everything is internal to the candidate entity.

²⁹“non est omnino unum, sed quodam modo plura et diversum a seipso” (Proslogion, 18).

³⁰“vel actu vel intellectu dissolvi potest” (Proslogion, 18).

³¹Schmitt, “The Deadlock of Absolute Divine Simplicity,” 125.

This makes aseity too easy to meet. The obvious response is to extend the requirement of ontological independence to all entities *and their internal parts*. Once we do this, however, we are back to *Absolute Ontological Independence*, a condition neither a pantheistic universe nor a God with metaphysical parts can meet. Only the entirely simple being of classical theism would be a suitable candidate for the ultimate being.

Now we could add in a condition relating to the dependence of the parts on the whole:

(1'') Necessarily, for any x , if x is the Ultimate/the Cosmos, x creates or maintains in existence whatever is not identical with x or a part of x and any part of x ontologically depends on x to be what it is.

This requires that candidates for ultimate being ground their parts. Their parts are what they are because of the whole. This move, however, is not one that will distinguish complex theism from pantheism. On both views, the ultimate being has parts or properties which it requires, even if these parts or properties are also ontologically dependent on the whole. Complex theists cannot require a stronger sort of dependence, such as creation, as God could not create God's own parts without circular ontological dependence, as I will show below. The weaker version of dependence of parts on wholes is one that pantheists also affirm. So pantheists can maintain this weaker view of aseity just as much as complex theists. Either we endorse a strong version of aseity, which neither complex theism nor pantheism meets, or a weak version, which both meet.

8. *The Unity of Complex Theism and the Unity of Pantheism*

We see this result again when it comes to the question of unity. Is a complex divine being sufficiently unified to be a candidate for the ultimate being? Would such a being be more unified than the cosmos? For any strategy the complex theist adopts to explain the unity of God, the pantheist can adopt a parallel strategy for the unity of the cosmos.

We see this in Gregory Fowler's recent defense of complex theism, based on the priority of the whole. The idea is that in certain unified structure the whole is explanatorily and ontologically prior to its parts. For example, the parts of the body have their status as parts because of the whole. Without the whole system in which they fit, the hand would not really be a hand nor the eye an eye. Gregory Fowler uses this notion to formulate a complex theism that he thinks can still respect the necessary metaphysical constraints. Fowler advocates for the following view:

The Doctrine of Divine Priority (DDP): For all x , if x is a proper part of God or x is a property of God, then x depends on God for its existence.³²

Fowler presents this as an alternative to divine simplicity. If the whole can be ontologically prior to its parts, then theists can preserve aseity without endorsing absolute simplicity.

³²Fowler, "Simplicity or Priority?"

But if this is true for the theist, it is also true for the pantheist. On standard versions of pantheism, everything that exists is a part of the divine whole, meaning that this whole only has relations of ontological and explanatory dependence with its parts and not with anything external.³³ Indeed, Fowler specifically models his priority relation on Schaffer's priority monism. Thus, a unified whole, such as the pantheist or priority monist cosmos, could have ontological priority over all of its parts in the same way that the complex theist's divine being has priority over its parts. Both wholes can claim to make the parts what they are, while also depending on these parts for their continued persistence. The pantheist is no worse off than the complex theist when it comes to unity.

Another recent defense of complex theism also suggests that they are on a par. Matthew Baddorf claims that we can conceive of God's relation to God's properties as the relation which the bearer of tropes has to the tropes. While there are bidirectional counterfactual dependence relations between tropes and their bearers (if this trope did not exist, then this bearer would not exist and vice versa), the bearer is ontologically prior to the tropes themselves.³⁴ This means that God must ground God's tropes. To argue that God is more fundamental than God's tropes, Baddorf makes a similar appeal to the priority of the whole, particularly the living whole over its parts, as defended by figures such as Aristotle, Hegel, and Schaffer.³⁵ But again, this is exactly the sort of move that the pantheist can make just as well.

Pantheist attempts to make sense of the unity of the cosmos might also be relevant to complex theism. Bauer, for example, has argued for what he calls a Directed Unity view, on which the many causal powers in the universe are all interrelated and intentionally directed towards one another. For a power to be what it is, there needs to be other appropriate powers to which it can be related, acting and being acted upon, so that "all properties (powers) form an interconnected web, meaning that no property is causally isolated from the others."³⁶ Complex theists certainly should not want to hold that various divine powers or properties are unrelated to one another, so the idea of a web of powers with mutual entailments may be useful. On this view of powers holism, "the functions of all the powers in a system are ontologically interdependent. As such, the powers that make up the system are capable of affecting each other: when one undergoes a change, the system is appropriately affected."³⁷ This could help the complex theist address concerns about whether various divine powers are separable from one another and whether they are necessarily

³³See Schaffer, "The Least Discerning and Most Promiscuous Truthmaker" and "Monism."

³⁴Baddorf, "Divine Simplicity," 407–409.

³⁵Baddorf, "Divine Simplicity," 412; cf. the Divine Truthmaker Complexity of Saenz, "Against Divine Truthmaker Simplicity."

³⁶Bauer, "Powers and the Pantheistic Problem of Unity."

³⁷Bauer, "Powers and the Pantheistic Problem of Unity."

coordinated. It would, however, again leave the complex theist using the same strategies as the pantheist.

We can say, then, that the most promising recent approaches for the complex theist to maintain the unity of the ultimate being are parallel to the pantheist's. Such theists are in no better a position than pantheists. If the ultimate entity is a one-many—one substance with many ontologically distinct properties (tropes, modes, properties, etc.)—then a pantheistic universe can meet these requirements just as well. The distinct classical theistic move of insisting on a one beyond the many is lost. Only divine simplicity can claim such an ontological advantage over pantheistic rivals.

9. *Complex Theism, Pantheism, and Necessity*

Now you might object that, on complex theism, God is a necessary being, giving God a better claim than the cosmos for being ultimate. Here again, however, many versions of pantheism hold that the cosmos is necessary in some sense.³⁸ Also, many of the conceptions of divine necessity put forward by complex theists are vulnerable to parity challenges. For example, Thomas Morris insists that God, as the creator of everything creatable, creates God's own haecceity or nature (making the nature causally dependent on God) but also that God's haecceity is logically sufficient for God's existence (making God logically dependent on his nature). Morris recognizes that this suggests that God is creating himself and attempts to avoid this by insisting that while each of these relations is always transitive, transitivity may not hold across both of them together.³⁹ But this is highly implausible. A being whose nature is necessary cannot have parts that it creates, as then it would both depend on these parts (since they are necessary and make it what it is) and these parts would depend on it (insofar as these parts are created). Morris's proposal seems incoherent. Even if it were defensible, it would be vulnerable to parity arguments. If reciprocal ontological dependence is not circular and needs no further explanation or grounding, Morris's view can be parodied by the pantheist or cosmic naturalist. The divine cosmos too could both make the parts that compose it while also depending on them.⁴⁰ If Morris's proposal were to turn out to be coherent, a self-making divine cosmos would be as well.

10. *Can the Formal Distinction Distinguish Complex Theism from Pantheism?*

There is one other recent approach in the literature that might be able to distinguish the unity and aseity of a complex and transcendent divine being from that of the cosmos. Yann Schmitt advocates for what he calls "absolute indivisibility," adopting a version of the more moderate simplicity advocated by John Duns Scotus. Scotus holds that the divine attributes

³⁸E.g. Spinoza *Ethics*, Ip29 and Ip33; Leslie, "What God Might Be."

³⁹Morris, *Anselmian Explorations*, 176.

⁴⁰Especially on pantheist views on which there is a guiding mind or soul to do the making.

are distinct from each another, but insists that they are so formally but not in reality. God and God's attributes are ontologically inseparable. This requires employing the formal distinction of Duns Scotus, which has three conditions:

X is formally distinct from Y if and only if (1) X and Y are inseparable even for an omnipotent being, (2) X and Y do not have the same definition, (3) the distinction between X and Y exists *de re*.⁴¹

Jeff Steele and Thomas Williams describe the view of Scotus as *unitive containment*. Scotus thinks that God and God's attributes are formally distinct, as this is necessary in order for there to be a union, but that they are also not distinct things *in re*. Scotus insists that this union is not a "composition or aggregation of distinct things" as such a composition would, he concedes, violate aseity and unity.⁴² Still, I agree with Steele and Williams that Scotus is, in fact, rejecting divine simplicity. As they note:

What Scotus calls simplicity involves mind-independent plurality—complexity, even if not (on Scotus's stipulative understanding of the word) composition—in God: precisely what his predecessors ruled out in the name of divine simplicity.⁴³

Now, does the formal distinction give the complex theist a plausible account of the unity of God with God's attributes that the pantheist cannot use?

The answer to this question depends, of course, on whether Scotus's formal distinction is itself plausible.⁴⁴ We need to accept that the formal distinction reflects a *de re* metaphysical distinction, even though X and Y are inseparable even for an omnipotent being. This raises a number of metaphysical issues. How do we assess and evaluate when a distinction between X and Y is *de re*, despite their inseparability? Which sorts of metaphysical views can affirm this sort of formal distinction?

For now, however, let us assume that we can accept Scotus's formal distinction. The formal distinction, on its own, is not enough to vindicate the complex theist. The formal distinction has to apply to God and God's attributes, while being too strict to apply to the cosmos and its parts. Are the divine attributes formally distinct but ontologically inseparable in a way that the attributes of the cosmos are not? If so, a complex divine being would be unified in a way that the cosmos cannot be allowing for a greater degree of simplicity and unity.

Now many of the features of the cosmos seem separable from one another by an omnipotent being, failing to meet condition (1) of the formal

⁴¹Following the reformulation of Schmitt, "The Deadlock of Absolute Divine Simplicity," 129.

⁴²*Ordinatio* IV, d. 46, q. 3, n. 74, trans. Steele and Williams. For discussion see Steele and Williams, "Complexity without Composition," 622–625.

⁴³Steele and Williams, "Complexity without Composition," 631.

⁴⁴As Steele and Williams note, "Complexity without Composition," 630.

distinction. Any version of pantheism that takes the cosmos to be composed of multiple distinct substances could not use the formal distinction. However, there are ways pantheists could deny this. If one endorses Bauer's version of powers holism, it is natural to think that powers are essentially individuated by the powers system they partly constitute. This could allow one to maintain that the cosmos, too, satisfies condition (1). *This* power is inseparable in being from what it is in *this* Directed Unity of powers that constitutes the cosmos. Since powers are essentially inter-defined, they cannot be ontologically separated from their corresponding powers, even by an omnipotent being. The cosmos and its parts do meet conditions (2) and (3) about distinctness, so if condition (1) were met, the cosmos would be a candidate for unitive containment. This points to an area where more work is needed by advocates of pantheism. How distinct is the cosmos from its parts on their views?

There are also a number of issues that need to be resolved to show how the God of complex theism could satisfy these three conditions. First of all, the components of the formal distinction rule out many omni-being approaches which involve the best overall balance between various divine attributes. If maximum omnipotence is separable from maximum goodness (and possibly impossible with it), then such a being would not satisfy condition (1) of the formal distinction. Considerable work needs to be done to show which divine perfections (and which degrees—the maximal ones?) are absolutely inseparable, that is, inseparable even for an omnipotent being.⁴⁵

Further, we would need distinct arguments for the inseparability of each and every divine attribute. Perfect being arguments that it would be better to have an attribute than not to have it would not be enough. Even if the best possible being would be both perfectly wise and perfectly loving this is not enough to show that "being perfectly wise" is logically and metaphysically inseparable from "being perfectly loving." The approach of Scotus sets a very high bar to meet.

Finally, the formal distinction may just be too stringent for most complex theists. It leaves us with a divine being all of whose attributes necessarily imply the others, with no features that could be separated from the divine being in any possible world. Such restrictions seem incompatible with many of the motivations that complex theists appeal to, such as allowing for a contingent and changing divine will or giving us a divine being that exists and changes in time.⁴⁶ Appealing to the formal distinction

⁴⁵The complexities of discussing these omniproperties, much less proving their necessary co-instantiation can be seen through examining the recent literature e.g., Rogers, *Perfect Being Theology*; Nagasawa, "A New Defence of Anselmian Theism" and "Models of Anselmian Theism"; Oppy, "Perfection, Near-Perfection, Maximality, and Anselmian Theism"; Bohn, "Anselmian Theism and Indefinitely Extensible Perfection"; Todd, "The Greatest Possible Being Needn't Be Anything Impossible."

⁴⁶E.g., Mullins, "Simply Impossible"; though Steele and Williams "Complexity without Composition," section 3, shows the relevance of Scotus's denial of simplicity to his voluntarist ethics.

may be the best option for a complex theist to metaphysically differentiate their position from pantheism, as it requires a level of unity and aseity that a pantheist cosmos may not be able to meet, while still falling short of absolute simplicity. Nevertheless, this metaphysical option does not seem open to most contemporary advocates of complex theism, given their other metaphysical and theological commitments. Versions of complex theism that do not go the Scotist route will remain on a metaphysical par with pantheism.

11. Conclusion

While pantheists are often accused of lacking a sufficient account of the unity of the cosmos and its supposed priority over its many parts, we have seen that pantheists have a powerful challenge for their theist critics: either give a satisfactory account of divine simplicity or accept that theism and pantheism are in the same sort of metaphysical position when it comes to explanatory and ontological priority. Current proposals for the metaphysics of complex theism do not offer any greater unity or ontological independence than pantheism, since they are modeled on priority monism. The best option for the complex theist may be reviving the formal distinction of Duns Scotus, but this requires considerable further metaphysical defense and may not be a live option for many complex theists, given their other commitments. To complex theist critiques of the unity and independence of the pantheist cosmos, pantheists can justly respond: *tu quoque*.

Only classical theists who affirm divine simplicity are better off with respect to aseity and unity than pantheists, since an absolutely simple first principle does not depend in any way on the being of something else and, having no parts, is in need of no explanation of its unity. If we endorse aseity and unity as constraints on ultimacy, we are pushed to acknowledge that the ultimate is entirely simple. Perhaps only proponents of divine simplicity can properly claim to have discovered and acknowledged a fully independent ultimate being.⁴⁷

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⁴⁷I would like to thank Matthew Baddorf and Paul Nedelisky for discussion of these topics and multiple referees for helpful comments and objections. This research was made possible by a grant from the Pantheism and Panentheism Project, funded by the John Templeton Foundation. The views expressed in it are those of the author and are not intended to reflect the views of the John Templeton Foundation.

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